

Let a Person Examine Himself
How to Eat the Lord's Supper
1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Text:

1 Corinthians 11:17-34 (ESV)

¹⁷ But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸ For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, ¹⁹ for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. ²⁰ When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. ²¹ For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. ²² What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not. ²³ For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. ²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. ³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. ³¹ But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. ³² But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. ³³ So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another—³⁴ if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment. About the other things I will give directions when I come.

Introduction:

Over the years I have come to treat the Lord's Supper under four clear directives that seem to be in this text. In other words, when we get together to eat the Lord's Supper, we ought to go about it by observing it with at least these four aspects in view:

- A Time of Exaltation and Praise – v.24, "...and when he had given thanks..."
- A Time of Reflection and Remembrance – v.24, 25, "...do this in remembrance of me..."
- A Time of Examination – v. 28, "Let a person examine himself..."
- A Time of Fellowship and Exhortation – v.33, "...wait for one another..."

As we strive to incorporate these elements into the Lord's Supper, the one element that is not emphasized often or easily is that of self-examination. Let's ponder that aspect of the Lord's Supper today.

But first, notice the context.

²⁰ When you come together, it is not the **Lord's** supper that you eat. ²¹ For in eating, each one goes ahead with **his own** meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. ²² What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

Paul laid down a fairly harsh indictment when he said it was not the **Lord's** Supper that they ate. Well, whose supper was it? The answer came in v. 21: "For in eating, each one goes head with **his own** meal." In other words, they were eating the meal in such a way that their actions and motives bore no resemblance to the kinds of actions and motives that should flow from a follower of Christ who dwells on the primacy of the cross.

What were their actions and motives? How is it that they were not resembling the nature of the cross when they came together to eat?

When they gathered together to eat (v.17) they did so with no regard to others. Self-interest and self-promotion were the condition of their hearts. Therefore, Paul says that he will not commend them for such behavior. It is not enough for a church to come together and go through the motions of eating the Lord's Supper. That means the eating and drinking, in and of itself, is of no value. The actions must be met with proper heart motives and values. At the very least the Lord's Supper is to be eaten in the context of a loving togetherness where each one takes up the interests of others – the church!

Why wouldn't he commend them? The answer he gives is contained in vv.23-26. These verses begin with the Greek word *gar* ["for"] and should be understood as "because." "I will not praise you . . . because . . ." His answer is simple: there is a way to eat the Lord's Supper that does justice to the picture and there is a way to eat the Lord's Supper that destroys the picture. The picture of what? The eating of the bread and the drinking of the cup are pictures of the death of the Lord. This is made plain in the concluding thought of v.26:

²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

The church is to eat of the Lord's Supper in such a way that it properly portrays or proclaims the Lord's death. **The central element that connects the Lord's death to the togetherness of the church is its self-emptying, self-sacrificing, self-giving service and sharing that is for the good of others.** These are at the heart of the cross! Everything Jesus did was for the good of others.

So to eat the Lord's Supper as the Lord's Supper is to eat in such a way that you exalt the death of Christ. And to eat the Lord's Supper is to eat in such a way that you demonstrate a love for the church – the body of Christ purchased by his NC blood.

Eating the Lord's Supper in this way is a call to love the church.

For Paul, this means, then, that the Lord's Supper is to be a means to self-examination. Each time we come to the Table, we are to examine ourselves to see if indeed we are approaching the Table in the right manner.

Vv.23-26 are positive. That is, they have been teaching the reader what it means to properly eat the Lord's Supper – they are to eat in such a way that the Lord's death is exalted (proclaimed). When a believer clearly sees the self-emptying sacrifice of Jesus for the good of sinners he will see himself properly and serve his fellow saints.

But in vv.27-32 Paul goes negative. He turns the worthy manner for eating on its head and issues a warning against unworthy eating. In so doing he magnifies a third design in the Lord's Supper – it is a call to self examination. “Make sure your heart is right before you eat.”

Let's remind ourselves what it means to eat in an unworthy manner. V. 27 picks up where v.22 left off. To eat in an unworthy manner means to eat in such a way that self-serving ambitions, which lead to a despising of the church and a humiliating of the poor, take center stage. The self-emptying sacrifice of Christ is no longer the center but our personalities, opinions and interests are.

Here is something staggering to think about – the church of Corinth expected Paul's commendation. The church of Corinth was gathering together as a church (v.18). They were eating the Lord's Supper. That is, they were going through the motions. They expected to be commended. So if you were to ask them whether they despised the church or not, what do you think their response would have been? “Us? Despise the church? No way! We love the church!” Don't miss this point – there is a way to come together as a church that is a despising of the church. In fact, there are many ways to come together and despise the church. But there is only one way to come together that honors the church – to so exalt Christ and worship in the cross of Christ that an air of humility is produced resulting in a sacrificial sharing and serving of one another.

- Do you come to church with a high and lofty view of yourself? To be noticed by others?
- Do you silently or vocally despise certain people who are here in this church? You despise their personality, their interests, their opinions?
- Do you regard church as a mere social gathering where you have no intentions of checking your own heart or being asked to submit to the teaching of God's word?
- Do you come to this place with your ears already stopped so as to not hear what is being said? Do you refuse to admit that you need help and change?

You see, the Table is to be a means to self-examination – Do I despise the church of God?

Let's back all the way up to the beginning and hit our last two points running. The main point Paul is addressing in this context is not the Lord's Supper. He is dealing with the way in which the church of Corinth was coming together as a church. You find that phrase in v.18: “coming together as a church.” In other words, Paul is addressing what church life – gathered life – corporate life – in a church should like. He addresses this particular church in light of its deficiencies. There were two. (1) When they came together, they were divided over certain personalities (cf. 1:10ff.). Some followed Paul; others followed Apollos; others followed Peter and some followed Christ. (2) When they came together in church life they were not aware of the needs of those around them. This was evident in the way they approached the Lord's Supper. It was a time of showcasing the status of the rich while the poor were shamed in their status (cf. v.21).

So Paul takes this one manifestation of the troubles from a day in the life of the church at Corinth, namely, their treatment of the poor in the observance of the Lord's Supper and he uses that as an illustration to make a case for one main point. The main point of chapter 11 is simply this – **Nothing about the gathered church life exalts an individual or serves selfish ends.** When a church comes together it is to center on the cross that views all men equally “savable;” sees the self humbly; serves and shares with all.

What this passage means for us, then, is this: when you come to church week in and week out, you are to be asking yourself, “Do I come to church to serve others or to be served?” “Do I come to church to participate in the lives of others or to be practiced upon?” “Am I coming to church with a longing to be stroked and noticed or am I going to encourage and lift up others?”

You see, it does not take long before the heart that comes to church with a desire to be served, to be noticed, to be stroked, gets very selfish, nit-picky, whiny, divisive, bitter and disruptive. The self-centered heart believes that the church gathered is a coming together for their sake. Paul says nothing could be more anti-cross and anti-Christian. If you do not come here with the 100% intention of serving and sharing your life with others – you don't understand the cross; you don't see your sinfulness; and you can't love others.

So into this very point, Paul brings the Lord's Supper as a means to self-examination. When the Lord's Supper comes around, you and I are to ask our hearts some very pointed and powerful questions. We are to come to the Table with a desire of having the cross expose our self-centered, self-preserving, self-defending, self-exalting hearts.

The Lord's Supper is a call to self-examination!

The call comes in the form of a warning.

²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks **without discerning** the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. ³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. ³¹ **But if we judged ourselves truly**, we would not be judged. ³² But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

In light of the fact that anyone who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner brings judgment upon himself, you had better examine yourself and “so” eat of the bread and drink of the cup. The little word “so” could be translated “in this manner.” Self-examination is the proper manner for eating. “Let a person examine himself then and in this manner eat of the bread and drink of the cup.” Examination is proper in light of the warning. And there is a way to eat that is fitting the warning (vv.23-26).

But then, Paul gives two sides to the examination: (1) In v.29, “anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself;” (2) “But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged.”

Notice two words: “discerning” (v.29) and “judged” (v.31). Both words are translations of the same Greek word. I believe Paul has a play on words going here because the word carries two meanings. First, if I properly judge the body I will judge properly myself. I don't know if you caught the difference but there is a difference.

In the first case, “judgment” has to do with assessing something. I would translate v.29 this way: “For anyone who eats and drinks without esteeming the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.”

The question becomes what body? Are we talking about the body of Christ that was broken for us? Or, are we talking about the body of Christ that is the church? I think the answer is in the context. In v.24 Paul mentions the body broken. In v.25 he mentions the blood of the covenant. From this point on, then, he speaks of the body and blood together every time he refers to the bread and cup. They are to be viewed as a unit.

In v. 27 they are a unit – bread and cup / body and blood.

In v. 28 they are a unit – bread and cup

Therefore, it does not make sense for Paul to say in v. 29, “Anyone who eats and drinks (a unit) without discerning the body” without mentioning the blood. Instead, the omission is plainly obvious

so that you and I will not miss the point. The broken body and shed blood purchased the promises for the body of Christ – the church.

The point is this. For you or I to come to the Table with a self-serving attitude is not esteeming the body of Christ. It misses the message of the cross, yes! But it also misses the importance of the church. This should clarify the first part of Paul's play on words: **If I properly judge the church I will judge properly myself.** He means in the first half – to properly judge the church – to esteem the body of the Christ. Thus, when you come to the Table in a spirit of self-examination, you should ask yourself, when I gather with this body of believers week in and week out, do I esteem the church? Do I hold it in high regard? Is it a precious part of my life? Are the people here important to me? Do they know I love them?"

The examination question #1 "Do I properly esteem the body of Christ?" (v.29) carries over into question #2 "Do I properly estimate my own sinfulness?" (v.31). Here is Paul's word play one more time: **If I properly judge the church I will judge properly myself.**

If the first use of the word "judge" means to assess something, the second use means to critique something. You are not to be critical of the body – though that is very easy! You are to be critical of yourself first!

When you and I come to the Table with a spirit of self-examination, we are to ask: "Do I see myself truly as a sinner?" "Do I think I am better than others?"

With such a spirit as this you will judge properly yourself and properly judge the church. Or, you will discern the body and detect your own sinfulness.

In this way the Lord's Supper is a call to self-examination.